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**რესტავრაციის, ხელოვნების ისტორიისა  
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TBILISI STATE ACADEMY OF ART

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## On the Semantics of the Trialeti Petroglyphs

There are many monuments situated in the territory of our country, where we can find carved drawings on the rock which cover a fairly wide range of time periods, starting from the Paleolithic and ending with the Bronze or early Iron Ages, and in some places, there are medieval chronological layers as well. Some of them have been studied and dated by archaeologists, but their analysis from the point of view of art history has not yet been conducted.

We started working on the theme of the Trialeti petroglyphs (**Fig. 1**) in the late 1990s. The results of our research were published in the book “Georgia 1”<sup>1</sup> in 2001, which was preceded by the study of other Upper Paleolithic monuments of this series: Mghvimevi (Upper Imereti) (**Fig. 2**) and Agtsa (Abkhazia) (**Fig. 3**). This was the first attempt to discuss the carved drawings on the rock from an art history point of view.

In general, based on the scientific articles and visual material related to prehistoric painting, we came to the conclusion that the images carved on the rock could be so-called pictorial magic, presumably derived from religious rituals. Our opinion was based on such Paleolithic caves (Kudaro, Tsutskhvati) discovered in Georgia, where according to scientists, magic rituals related to the cult of the bear were performed. For example, there were notches visible on the skull of a cave bear found in the cave in Kudaro with its jaws facing the center, which clearly indicated its ritual purpose<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, at the earliest period of human development, as elsewhere, we should also have had a cult of a bear. This means that a man at this time, based on his beliefs and ideas, already performed certain rituals. These rituals were magical in nature and were probably intended to influence things (or events) that were important to a man at that time. Thus, it was a kind of a ritual magic. Later, from this, the so-called pictorial magic should have arisen, that is, a man performing rituals should have replaced the real object of worship with its image - a painting or statue. At that time, the scientific community did not share our opinion that the images engraved on the rock to some extent reflected the beliefs and ideas of a man of that time<sup>3</sup>. However, the archaeologists who have discovered the “drawings” of Mghvimevi<sup>4</sup> and Agtsa<sup>5</sup> considered the geometrical figures or abstract motifs as conventional signs of a symbolic nature. Despite such contradictory opinions, we felt the interest and support

1 ა.კლდიაშვილი, მ. იზორია, *საქართველო 1*, ხელოვნების ისტორია უძველესიდან გვიანბრინჯაო-ადრერკინის ხანამდე (A. Kldiashvili, M. Izoria, *Georgia 1*, History of Art from Ancient times to the late Bronze – early Iron Age), Tbilisi, 2001 pp. 4-14

2 В. П. Любин, Высокогорная пещерная стоянка Кударо I, «Известия всесоюзного географического общества» (V.P. Lubin, Highland cave site Kudaro I, “Periodicals of the All-Union Geographical Society”), 1959, v. 91, v. 2. pp. 173-183

3 მ. იზორია, აგცას მღვიმის ზედა პალეოლითის ხანის გრაფიკული გამოსახულებები (M. Izoria, Graphic images of the Upper Paleolithic period of Agtsa Cave), *ACADEMIA*, 2001, Vol. 1, pp. 68-72

4 С. Н. Замятнин., Пещерные навесы Мгвимеми близ Чиатур, Советская Археология (S. N. Zamyatnin, Mgvimevi cave shelters near Chiatura, *Soviet Archeology*), 3, 1937, pp. 57-76

5 Л. Н. Соловьев. Надписи и изображения грота **Агца** у сел. Анухва-Абхазская. Материалы и исследования по археологии СССР, (L. N. Soloviev. Inscriptions and images of the Agtsa grotto near the village Anukhva-Abkhazian. *Materials and researches on archeology of the USSR*), М., #79, 1960. pp. 164-175

of some scientists, including Otar Lortkipanidze, Otar Japaridze and Iuzia Khuskivadze, for which we are very grateful. At present, this point of view is shared by researchers of this field, and it is clear that art history (and not only) research of the carved “drawings” on the rock preserved on our territory, is still relevant.

From the very beginning, we should note that the scientific community was very interested in the Trialeti petroglyphs as rock paintings depicting the physical world. This is primarily evidenced by the fundamental archaeological and paleontological research dedicated to the Trialeti petroglyphs by its discoverers<sup>6</sup>. The monument itself is located in Kvemo Kartli, 12 km from Tsalka, in the village of Gantiadi. The rocky “drawings” were found on a rocky terraced massif covered with moss at the Avdristskali, right tributary of the Ktsia River, formerly called Patara Khrami gorge. Today it has the status of a cultural heritage monument<sup>7</sup>, and archaeological researches in the area continue.<sup>8</sup> According to the Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation, these types of petroglyphs, including a man-hunter, have been found in several other places on the rocky terraces of the left bank of the river (2018); Therefore, it is assumed that at one time the gorge has been entirely inhabited.

The small images found on the Trialeti rocky massif (their size varies from 2.5 to 20 cm) are divided into several chronological groups, the

6 M. Gabunia, A. Vekua, *პატარა ხრამის პეტროგლიფები* (M. Gabunia, A. Vekua, *Petroglyphs of Patara Khrami*), Tbilisi, 1980, p. 85

7 Cultural Heritage portal <https://memkvidreoba.gov.ge/objects/immovable/immovableObject?id=16087>

8 M. Gabunia, M. Gabashvili, *თრიალეთის პეტროგლიფები — განადგურების საფრთხის ქვეშ, რეგიონალური თანამშრომლობა კულტურული მემკვიდრეობის განვითარებისათვის* (M. Gabunia, M. Gabashvili, *Trialeti Petroglyphs - In Danger of Destruction, Regional Cooperation for Cultural Heritage Development*, #5, 2014, <http://rcchd.icomos.org/?l=G&m=4-4&JID=5&AID=40&l2>

earliest of which (**Fig. 4**) likely dates to the Mesolithic period, and the next layers reach the middle Bronze Age.<sup>9</sup> On a 50m long rocky massif the images are applied in groups. There are mostly represented animals (**Fig. 5**), however images of humans are also found next to them (**Fig. 6**). In addition, there are signs of astral or other symbolic meaning, conveyed in geometric forms.

In this article, we will focus mainly on images of animals and people. As a rule, these type of “drawings” always depict fauna characteristic of a given location. The fossil bones really confirm that the Trialeti rock mass depicts animals that once inhabited Georgia: red deer, bear, horse, chamois, wild goat, cow, bull, fawn, snake and, possibly, even a camel. There are also images of birds, as well as fantastic and hybrid animals: a horse with a camel hump, a bird with a tortoise shell.

As we already mentioned, the animals on the walls of the cave are arranged in groups, and these groups give the impression of some kind of order. In this respect, the Trialeti petroglyphs differ from the chaotically arranged images of Aghsai and earlier period caves found in the territory of Georgia. This suggests that at this stage, the ancient man already had the desire to consciously master the plane, that is, to distribute the images on the plane according to a certain principle (in this case, in groups), i.e. we are dealing with the beginning of a composition.

On the Trialeti petroglyphs, animals are always depicted in profile. Most of them are turned to one side, and thus create a single direction in the groups. However, the images themselves are static, devoid of movement and dynamics. Some animal figures are depicted with their backs to the group, some are pierced with arrows (**Fig. 7**), and some are trapped. In certain cases, one or two animals are separated from the group, as if they have fallen behind and can no longer keep up with the rest. Here and there the groups include small scenes, for example a herd of horses

9 M. Gabunia, A. Vekua, *ref. work*, pp. 9-10; 58-72

(**Fig. 8**), a horse with a foal, or a doe with a fawn - in some places, a fawn suckling. One image is very interesting - a figure of a fawn (**Fig. 9**) drawn inside a doe, in this case, probably, a pregnant doe. Such details give a kind of life to the scenes.

Deer and horses are most common among animals. The deer, because of its antlers, was considered a sacred animal in the Paleolithic period. High branching antlers are considered to be a link with heaven and the spiritual world. Consequently, a horn had a sacred meaning and was a special object of worship. That is, there was a cult of horns. This is confirmed by a large number of different animal horns found in the cave, covered with magic marks. Deer antlers differ in size from other horned animals (tur, chamois, wild goat), therefore, in the imagination of ancient man, it was perceived as a divine sign. This is probably why it is most often depicted on the petroglyphs of Trialeti. When speaking about the sacred meaning of horns, we must turn to the images of bulls presented on the Trialeti petroglyphs (**Fig. 10**), which were probably chosen by the ancient people living here according to this sign. In all likelihood, it was the long and pointed horns of a deer and a bull and their sacred meaning that later led to the combination of these two animals into one creature, *khariremi* (bull-deer) (**Fig. 11**). Besides a deer, a horse is most often found on the Trialeti petroglyphs (**Fig. 12**). Several times it is represented with one or two humps, like a camel. The fact that this humpbacked animal is actually a horse is confirmed by comparison with the figure of a camel depicted in the same place. If we consider that the horse at this time had not yet been tamed by man, then this shape on its back cannot indicate a load. It can be assumed that the humped shape of a horse would have some kind of symbolic meaning. Surely, the question arises: Is there any connection between a horn and a hump? Is it possible that in pictorial magic the symbolic meanings of a horn and a hump or an excrescence on a body of

an animal are similar or even identical? It is quite acceptable that a hump on a horse's body, like horns of a deer and a bull, was a sign of divinity, indicating the connection of these animals with the heavenly world through a horn. This idea is supported by two cone-shaped little humps, marked by a line on the back of one of the fantastic animals depicted here, which undoubtedly emphasizes the divinity of this animal and its connection with the heavenly world. Thus, one or two humps on the image of a horse can be a sign of its divinity. It seems that this shape or a hump was later replaced by wings and, probably, the fabulous winged horse, Pegasus, originated from there.

Thus, by the imagination of an ancient man, a deer and a horse are animals associated with heaven. It should also be noted that only these two animals - a deer and a horse - are trapped in the hunting net on these petroglyphs (**Fig. 13**). What is this image supposed to mean? It may just be a hunting scene, but it is possible that behind this image one can find some meaning and consider a hunting trap as a sacred attribute for "capturing souls". According to the belief of ancient man, by capturing a sacred animal, he establishes a connection with the heavenly driving forces of the universe and influences them. The fact that the net form is indeed a sacred attribute is confirmed by its use in other images. For example, in one scene we find a strange creature with a bird's head and legs, and its body is covered with intersecting lines that form a net shape. This shape is perceived by some as a shell of a turtle, and therefore they consider it to be the image of a turtle, but the characteristic shape of its legs and the form of its head clearly resemble a bird. A snake is depicted at its feet. (**Fig. 14**) It is possible that this is an archaic, not yet established form of struggle between a bird and a snake (heaven - good and hell - evil powers). The good power of heaven is represented by the bird, and this explains the fact that its body is covered with a net or a sacred, divine form.

The main novelty of the Trialeti petroglyphs is the image of a man (**Fig. 15**) who is a hunter. Unlike the animal figures depicted in profile, he is always presented in full face. His body is represented by simple scratched contour lines, and the features on his face are drawn primitively. A man stands calmly and does not chase an animal, as is often the case with contemporary monuments. It is also noteworthy that in all cases he holds a stick in his hand. The stick, according to ethnographic researches, is the former type of a staff. And a staff, as it is known, has always been a symbol of consecration and power. Thus, the hunter depicted here is probably the chosen one who has the ability to make contact with heavenly powers through animals and to magically influence them. It is also strange that the man never holds a bow and arrow in his hand, this weapon is always depicted next to him and in most cases, it is also covered with a net form. Therefore, the bow and arrow can also be considered as a sacred weapon with which a man hunted a sacred animal. It is noteworthy that the already killed animal is not depicted here, only the wounded one, that is, the emphasis is on the moment of capturing an animal alive. It should also be noted that the hunting process itself is not reflected here, i.e. the hunting scene is not really represented - how the hunter chases the animal, how he directs the bow and arrow, and so on.

Thus, we can say that here we are dealing with conveying the sacred, the symbolic sense of hunting, and not with a direct illustration of hunting, action or storytelling. But what is the true sense of hunting? Every scientist studying ancient paintings on this topic believes that hunting scenes reflect the ritual of magical influence on the powers of fertility that restore nature. And the performer of this ritual is, apparently, the hunter himself.

It is noteworthy that the figures of animals are fulfilled much more skillfully and lively than those of humans. Their images are carved with a contour line and emphasize the characteristic shape of an-

imals, which makes it easier to identify. For example, we distinguish images of camels and horses by the characteristic shape of their heads.

As we have already mentioned, the Trialeti petroglyphs had been enriched with new images during a long time. The basis of this conclusion is that different groups of paintings are stylistically very different from each other. The earliest layer, including only few images, must belong to the developed Mesolithic period, and the images of animals in this layer are distinguished by particular vividness. In these images, the contour lines are fluid, the silhouettes are flexible, plastic and it vividly conveys the characteristic forms of animals. This layer includes images of deer and fawns. On a later layer, the conditionality intensifies: the contour line is angular in places, and in some places broken. A herd of horses, images of trapped animals, as well as human figures undoubtedly belong to this period. The rest of the images are extremely stylized and schematic and belong to later periods, probably the Early and Middle Bronze Age.

Thus, the images of different periods presented here assure us that the rocky massif of river Avdristskali (formerly Patara Khrami) has been considered a sacred place for a long time. The multi-layered monuments of the mentioned Agtsa, Damir-Gaya<sup>10</sup> discovered near the village of Kasumlo in Kvemo Kartli, Undoklde-Pitsitskaro<sup>11</sup> in Upper Imereti discovered in the recent past,

10 მ. მენაბდე, თ. კიგურაძე, ქვემო ქართლის არქეოლოგიური ექსპედიციის 1980-81 წლების მუშაობის შედეგები, საქართველოს სახელმწიფო მუზეუმის არქეოლოგიური ექსპედიციები (M. Menabde, T. Kiguradze, Results of the Kvemo Kartli Archaeological Expedition in 1980-81, *Archaeological Expeditions of the Georgian State Museum*), XIII, Tbilisi, 1986, pp. 27-28

11 ნ. თუშაბრამიშვილი, პალეოლითური სადგომის უნდო კლდის კვლევის წინასწარული შედეგები, საქართველოს ეროვნული მუზეუმის მოამბე (N. Tushabramishvili, Preliminary Results of the Study of the Paleolithic Site Undo Klde, *Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum*), # 1, 2009, pp. 47-58

probably also had the function of a sacred place: a shrine. And the ritual that took place here must have been unchanged, because the content of the drawings that are directly related to the ritual and cult, and the semantic meanings of the images, practically do not change.

As we have mentioned, one small group of animals of the Trialeti petroglyphs is the most important monument of the Mesolithic Age, which is very peculiar and has no direct analogs. Contemporaneous graphic images of identical content found on the territory of other countries are of more illustrative, descriptive character and, to some extent, contain narrative elements, while in the Trialeti petroglyphs, of all layers we are dealing with, a meaning is transmitted with a conditional form. Even the hunting scenes of the next Mesolithic layer do not directly reflect the hunting itself, but only imply this action. The contour drawing of the Trialeti petroglyphs is also generalized, geometric and schematic. All this points to a certain legacy and continuity of traditions that have existed on our territory since ancient times.

The uniqueness of the Trialeti petroglyphs is also manifested in the fact that the similarity with the graphic “drawings” of different countries or regions (Spain, France, Baikal, Lower Amur, Karelia, Crimea, Siberia, Central Asia or Azerbaijan) of the same period and the same type, according to preliminary data, is limited to only individual elements.

It is clear that the Trialeti petroglyphs require further study and it is necessary to compare them with the materials found in different parts of the world, as well as with the monuments of the same series or period found on the territory of Georgia; especially since the tradition of “drawings” depicting the physical world continues to exist in the Middle Ages in the mountains and lowlands of our country.



Fig. 1. View of the rock mass of the Trileti petroglyphs.

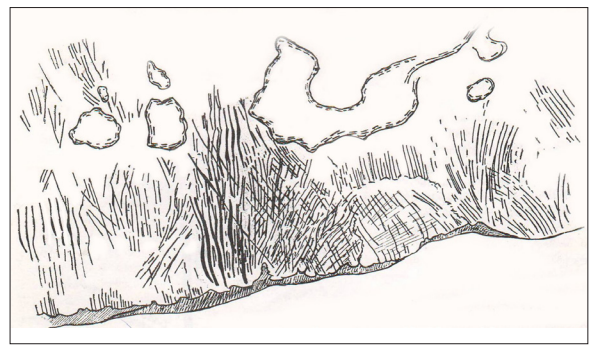


Fig. 3 Images of Agtsa Cave. Abkhazia, Upper Paleolithic.

Fig. 2 Geometric figures of the Mghvimevi cave. Imereti. Upper Paleolithic.

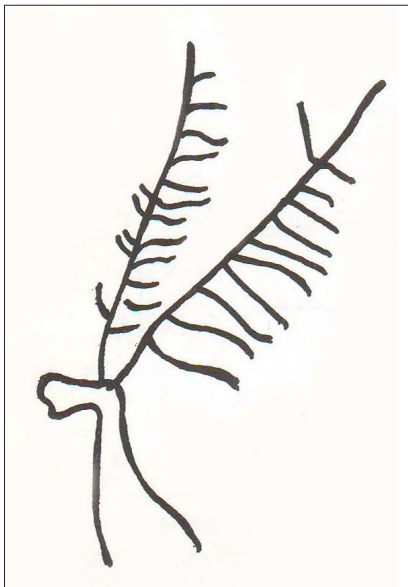


Fig. 4 Deer. Mesolithic period. Trialeti.

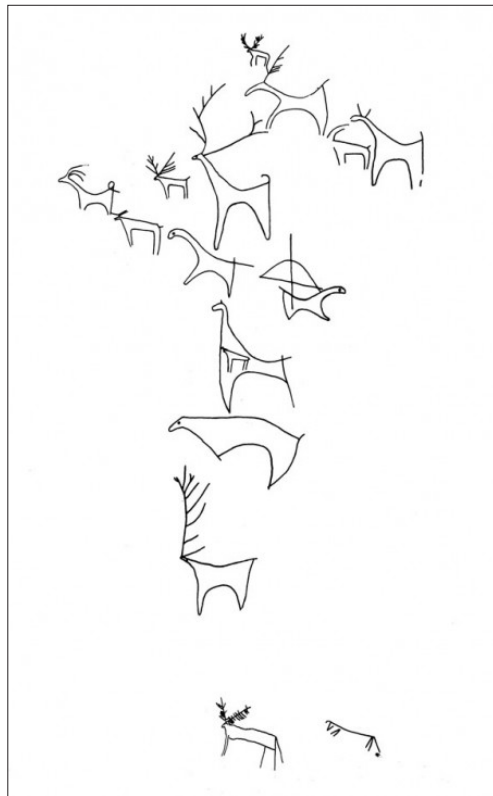


Fig. 5 images of animals. Trialeti.

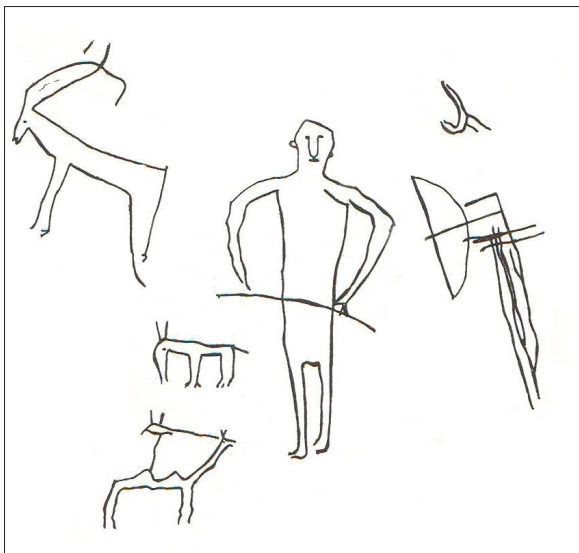


Fig. 6 Image of a man. Trialeti.

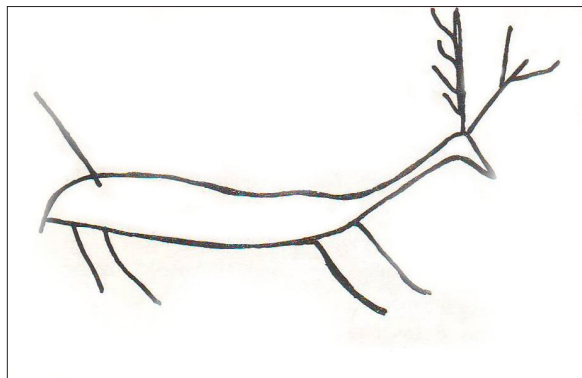


Fig. 7 Wounded deer. Trialeti.

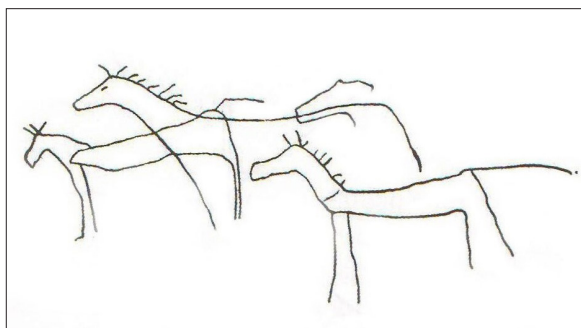


Fig. 8 Horse herd. Trialeti.

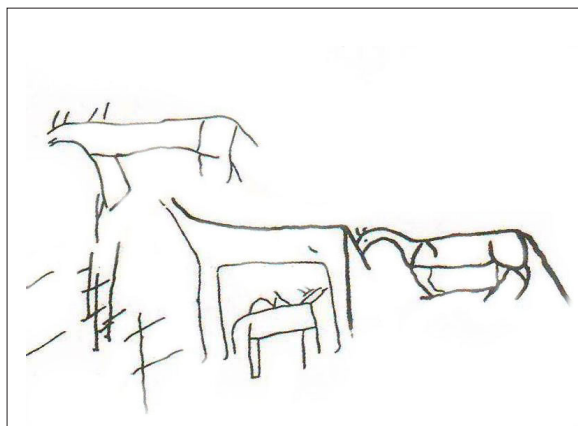


Fig. 9 Pregnant she-deer. Trialeti

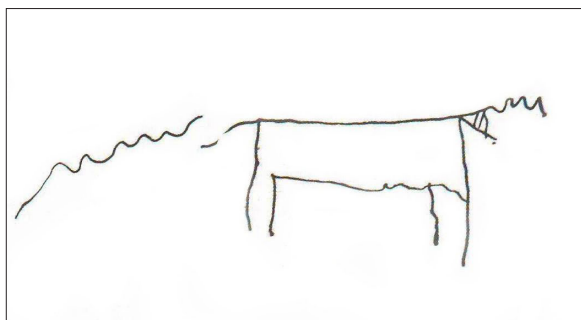


Fig. 10 Bull and snake. Trialeti.

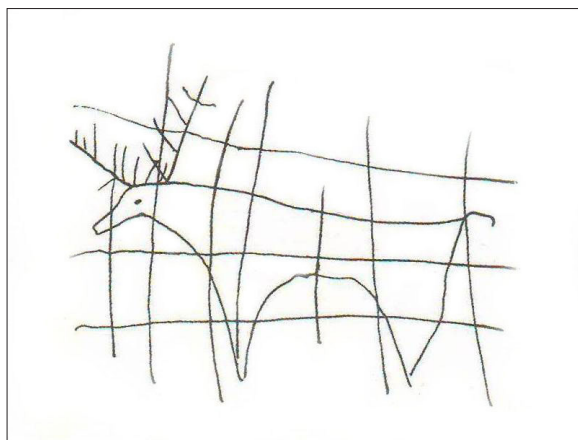


Fig. 11 Deer in the net. Trialeti.



Fig. 12 Humpbacked horse. Trialeti.

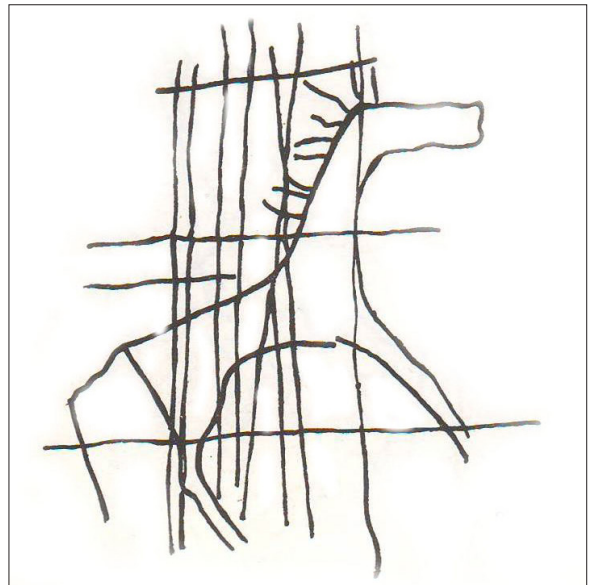


Fig. 13 Horse in a trap. Trialeti.

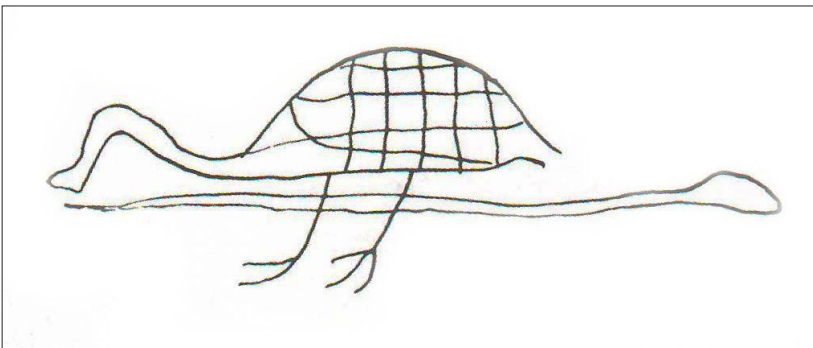


Fig. 14 Bird and snake. Trialeti.



Fig. 15 Image of a man. Trialeti.